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White Paper

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Voices of LGBT History in Rochester, New York

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Introduction

The University of Rochester River Campus Libraries (RCL) and the Gay of Alliance of Genesee Valley (GAGV) which has since the receipt of this grant changed their name to the Out Alliance, received NEH funding for a pilot to create a detailed plan to preserve and provide wider access to a significant collection of cultural heritage and historical documentation on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community in Rochester, New York.

This pilot project was developed to create a stronger mechanism for community/university collaboration with regard to documenting and providing access to rich source materials that were previously inaccessible. These materials not only will serve to inspire, educate, and share personal information about LGBTQI life and history of the Rochester community, but will foster new collaborations between an academic special collections library and community organization.

These important archival holdings include born-digital oral histories, early radio programs, photographs, videotapes, newsletters, and corporate papers from GAGV archives that shed light on the diversity of individuals, organizations, and institutions which supported the early struggle for gay rights, previously virtually excluded from Rochester's history. The pilot project

served to a collaborative structure and culture for the two organizations to carry out and evaluate activities such as creating transcriptions, closed-captions, and metadata for the Shoulders To Stand On (STSO) oral histories source material and Green Thursday radio program, a subset of the larger Rochester LGBTQ archive. The overarching goals of this pilot program were to secure these materials in RCL's digital repository and make them broadly accessible both through the RCL's digital collections portal, and through ingestion into the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) as well as to create a model of collaboration, curation, and preservation that will ultimately serve the entire collection, as well as future collections, and the community.

The co-project managers evaluated this activity and assessed the collaborative framework between the organizations, with a focus on a sustainable and strategic plan for preserving and making available to the collection in its entirety. The project reveals a hitherto undisclosed understanding of the fuller history of the LGBT national struggle for civil rights for scholars, students, and the general public, and will provide a foundation for future growth based on the success of the pilot, and the development of a shared appreciation and understanding of the need for community/archives collaboration.

Project Activities

In addition to the work that was undertaken to transcribe and close caption the materials for inclusion online, a definitive effort was made to identify and hire students to work on the project that would bring their own unique perspective to the work.

The project itself was completed in time and almost at budget, with the repository contributing a small amount additional funds for final student work, including the students preparing and presenting their work at a collaborative presentation at the Out Alliance and to celebrate the opening of the collection.

Key personnel did change significantly during the course of the project, with two of the main project people for the University of Rochester leaving the institution not long after the funding was secured. Adjustments were made to the key personnel, adding two new members to the project, but the directives and project parameters were not changed. The primary issue with adding new personnel and losing the originators of the project was that there was a need to readjust schedules and goals in order to meet the work plan.

As a culmination of this successful project, the results of the work were presented at Out Alliance, the Rochester LGBTQ community organization to a broad and engaged audience on May 3, 2018. This program included presentations by co-PIs Evelyn Bailey (Out Alliance) and Jessica Lacher-Feldman (University of Rochester), and the three students working on the project. The key results of this program were the opportunity to uncover new potential sources for information and collections from the community, and the creation of a shared understanding that there is a broad appreciation for the history of the Rochester community writ large within the archival community. Further, it was not an “us and them” moment, but rather a convergence of objectives and an outpouring of mutual appreciation and value. Audience members included local high school students, participants in the original interviews, and a broad range of community members. Of special significance is that this program, like the

project itself, embraces and supports the large deaf community in Rochester, New York by providing American Sign Language interpreters for the program.

Accomplishments

The accomplishments of the project were directly in line with our proposal and objectives. We sought to transcribe, close caption, and make available to a global audience via the World Wide Web, the source materials for the Shoulders to Stand On documentary film and the Green Thursdays radio program. This is to provide to the broadest audience possible, including Rochester's significant deaf community, access to video of stories of gay life in the Rochester community. The specific, concrete deliverable of providing these materials to the public is one part. Additionally, and is evidenced by the goodwill created through the public programming, the development of a shared commitment to preserving and making accessible this history, and to look for future collaborations as it relates to archiving LGBTQ history in Rochester, is significant.

Audiences

In making a full collection of audio oral history interviews and radio shows available freely online, we were able to reach a prospective audience that expands well beyond the audience that might be able to access these materials if they were not available on the world wide web. It is most poignant to note that the new and underserved audiences include LGBTQ youth in rural or more conservative communities who may seek out voices like their own as they begin to navigate "coming out" and exploring their own identity.

As part of this project we were able to present a talk on the project at the Out Alliance, formerly the GAGV, in order to share the results of this project, and how we made the project work. The presenters included Evelyn Bailey and Jessica Lacher-Feldman, as well as the three graduate students who worked on the project.¹

What is most important about this project is to note that the project and the project deliverables, and especially the presentation at the Out Alliance, created a greater understanding about members of the LGBTQ community in Rochester that the University of Rochester's Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, is taking an active role in documenting and preserving underrepresented voices as part of their archival mission and collection development. This includes engaging the community and working collaboratively with members of the community.

The audience for the project ranges from those who have seen the *Shoulders to Stand On* documentary film and are interested in hearing fuller stories, to individuals who have not been exposed to the experiences of members of the gay community during the period leading up to and just following Stonewall. One particular audience that will benefit, as we have seen from one of our students working on the project, are individuals who are coming to understand their own sexuality and may not have resources in their own community to address the notion of coming out or identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. Underserved audiences include high school students, college students, and the broader community, particularly those who use the Digital Public Library of America.

¹ To read the student presentations from the Out Alliance presentation, visit: <https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/blog/rochester-new-york-voices-lgbt-history>

This collaboration can also feed our work in documenting LGBTQ experiences in our community. We are currently working on a city-wide project to reflect on the Stonewall Riots and the connection with Rochester fifty years later. That exhibit will be in the main branch of the Rochester Public Library and will include material from this project.

Evaluation

The project was evaluated by members of the University of Rochester River Campus Libraries during the period of production, with a focus on how the metadata functions with regard to searching and retrieving information from the whole project. These interim evaluations allowed us to make mid-course corrections in terms of the metadata and allowed for the student working on the project to adjust accordingly.

The public has responded very favorably to the project, not just for the technological benefits of searching, isolating and reviewing clips of audio because of the transcription and captioning, but for the important and moving information contained in the project. It is clear that this project will create new opportunities for collaboration and activity as it relates to both sharing LGBTQ history, but also thinking more broadly about community archiving, collaboration, and issues of accessibility.

Continuation of the Project

The materials that were included in this specific project are finite. We specifically chose a set sample of materials (the source oral history interviews for the Shoulders to Stand On documentary film and the archival recordings of the Green Thursdays/Lesbian Nation radio

program. While we cannot continue specifically with these materials, we set out to develop this project and see it through from beginning to end in order to better understand the workflows for working with audio and video materials; to work collaboratively with a community organization; and to address issues of visibility and disability in the archives. These three components of this project will feed into how we move forward with other similar projects, and how we connect with community organizations in developing relationships that lead to partnerships in documenting our community with an emphasis on marginalized or underrepresented groups.

As a result of this project, we have been further reflecting on how to better create these community connections beyond Out Alliance. Members of the Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, have begun an active movement to better document social justice and advocacy in our community. Two members of the staff have just had a book chapter proposal accepted, and have submitted a proposal for a track as part of a national archives/special collections conference for 2020.

This project, in part, has helped us to reexamine our collection development policy with regard to what we actively collect and how we engage more marginalized members of our communities. We are currently looking at an initiative to work in the community to document and archive the issue of homelessness in the Rochester community. This directly connects to the work with this project. Two major issues in the community relating to the closing of an inner-city residential hotel and the disbanding of homeless “camps” in the city have led to both activist response, and the recognition by the archival community that documenting and

working directly with the disenfranchised community will lead to new and innovative approaches to archival work.

Long Term Impact

In the Fall of 2018, the Out Alliance will present this archival and preservation partnership model to the National Center Link Conference to be held Rochester. This will expose many LGBTQ organizations with information on how to develop and create the partnership modeled by the Out Alliance and the RCL. In September 2018, the Rochester Human Rights Campaign will be holding informational meetings for grass roots organizations on the current political climate and strategies to resist. A part of the “resist strategy” is having a documented history of programs, advocacy work, and education archived and preserved so that these diverse groups existence cannot be discounted. Archiving and preserving this history gives evidence of a group’s very existence and is necessary to demonstrate the contributions they have made to the civil rights movement locally, in New York and nationally. Once documented and archived, these groups become identified creators of this history thereby guaranteeing their rightful place in history and at the table.

Additionally, we are looking at ways to share the impact of this project at future conferences and programs, both in the community and more widely. Small demonstrations of the project and the resources it offers have been provided, most recently as an introductory component to a program at the University of Rochester in honor of 2018 “Coming Out Day”. The project was demonstrated, showing users how to seek out information relating to their own interests and concerns through the searchable interface, and how the material can be downloaded and used

as needed.

The material featured in this project will also be mined and used for a city-wide exhibition to open in March of 2019, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. The work on this exhibit includes members of the community, archival repositories, and other key individuals, and will serve as an additional public manifestation of this important project.

Award Products

The most significant product that came out of this NEH grant-funded project was the resource that we were able to create and make available freely online at

<https://digitalcollections.lib.rochester.edu/ur/rochester-new-york-voices-lgbt-history-project>

Conclusion

The opportunity to build a rich digital collection and to provide unprecedented access through the use of closed captioning and transcription was a great benefit to all parties who worked on the project, as well as to the community at large. Through the development of this project we learned not only key tools for collaborative work in the development of an accessible digital collection, but we also gained great benefits in terms of building a connection between the archive and the community that the archive can serve, and that, in turn, the community can also serve the archive. The symbiotic nature of collection building, creating access, sharing information, and building trust, value, and appreciation for both the work of archivists, and the stories within our own community, are critical as we look to broaden, diversify, and strengthen the archival record for posterity. This project speaks to the future of archival work, and of the beauty and value of collaboration in order to document, preserve, and make accessible the rich

and important stories of the recent past in our community. There is also distinct value in communicating that “the archives” stretches from the past, through the present, and into the future, and that there is dynamism, importance, and value both historically, and personally, with these collections.